

THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EUGENIO MARIA DE HOSTOS INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL 318
101 WALTON STREET, BROOKLYN, N.Y. 11206
Phone (718) 782-0589 / Fax (718) 384-7715 / IS318.com

Principal

Leander E. Windley

Assistant Principals

*John Galvin Zbigniew Makuch
John Nagler*

Cahn Project

"EQUITY AND SCHEDULING AS IT AFFECTS ACHIEVEMENT"

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Leander Eric Windley – Cahn Fellow

Adrienne Santamaria – Ally

Meghan Nunziata – ELL/MLL Coordinator

Doreen Poole – Crisis Intervention Teacher

ABSTRACT

By providing all students with the opportunity to interact with their peers in a heterogeneous atmosphere, we are exposing them to different ways of handling social, emotional and academic experiences. At I.S. 318, the students “at risk” and many of the subgroups traditionally, have not benefitted from school wide programs due to intervention scheduling conflicts.

Find out how through strategic and well thought out programming, a diverse Title I Middle school promoted student learning & engagement and increased student achievement for their students “at risk” and their subgroups, by providing access to all school wide programs.

Introduction

By providing all students with the opportunity to interact with their peers in a heterogeneous atmosphere, we are exposing them to different ways of handling social, emotional and academic experiences. At I.S. 318, the students “at risk” and many of the subgroups traditionally, have not benefitted from school wide programs due to intervention scheduling conflicts.

Find out how through strategic and well thought out programming, a diverse Title I Middle school promoted student learning & engagement and increased student achievement for their students “at risk” and their subgroups, by providing access to all school wide programs.

I.S. 318 is a 6th – 8th grade Title I middle school that presently accommodates 1210 students. Within the school’s population there are general education students, special education students, (12:1:1) and a special population of students with more severe developmental challenges.

The students enrolled in our Gifted and Talented program take Regents exams in Algebra, Living Environment, U.S. History and Earth Science when they are in the 8th grade. 42% of the students pass their Regents with proficiency.

I.S. 318 also boasts a variety of programs before, during and after school that incorporate the creative and industrial arts into the education of each child that attends the school. The daily attendance at the school has consistently hovered around 95%. We believe that every child learns better in the safe and secure environment that we provide for our students.

The parents, teachers and administrators of the Intermediate School 318, family believe that all students can achieve excellence and meet high and demanding academic standards. By fostering a strong home and school partnership, we are committed to creating a safe, nurturing educational setting in which all students can excel. Every person in our school community will be dedicated to improving student achievement. Through the creation of a learning environment that inspires students, we believe that we can meet and exceed any goal, as well as prepare our students for the challenges ahead.

92% of the teachers are “highly qualified”. All of the after-school programs and sports teams are coordinated and coached by members of the faculty. Teachers are highly collegial and schedule classroom intervisitations and coordinate book clubs with one another. Teacher teams meet once a week regularly. The low-income rate of 67.5% makes a “universal” free lunch school. The Demographics are as follows: 51% male, 49% female, 7.6% Asian, 15.7% Black, Hispanic, 17.7% White, 1.3% other. The student population also consists of 20.8% students with disabilities and 5.6% English language learners.

Statement of the Problem

At I.S. 318, there is a significant achievement gap between the scores of our ESL and SWD students on the standardized ELA and Math assessments when compared to the averages of ESL and SWD students citywide. Analysis of the June Instructional Reports revealed that our above-named subgroups struggle with constructed response questions and questions that require more in-depth critical thinking.

After reviewing and dissecting the item skills analysis data from the State exams in ELA and Math, we concluded that our students with disabilities (SWD's) and ESL students have consistently performed well below City averages.

The instructional cabinet, teacher leaders and some of our related service providers have been meeting to discuss strategies and methodologies to overcome these gaps to support student growth academically, socially and emotionally.

To address the concern of students entering the school two to three grades below grade level, and expected to perform, with proficiency, on the end of the year State assessments in ELA and Math, we have restructured our entire academic intervention program. These programs include the Literacy and Math Recovery program and our Saturday Academic and Enrichment Recovery Program. This restructuring includes having the student's master their current performance levels, then move to have them reach mastery on the levels thereafter.

The Saturday program is designed to have the students enrolled in 5-week modules so that teachers could assess and give actionable feedback to students and parents. The goal is to address the performance level academic needs of the students and assess their growth and eventual mastery of the content, with the end goal being these students will be at or near their current grade level by the end of the year

The Literacy and Math Recovery program is no longer being done as an afterschool program that meets twice a week for two hours. We have decided to incorporate it as a daily intervention program.

Many of the students who were enrolled in the After School Reading and Math Recovery Program became very resistant, over time, to being mandated to attend this program for two hours two days a week. The students felt that they weren't given the opportunity to interact with their peers or participate in some of the programs that could positively affect their social, emotional and academic growth. Programs such as Debate Club, Community Events Coordinators and some of the competitive sports teams.

After meeting with the students, families and staff I decided to take another approach that I believed would be beneficial to the students. This formulated my thought process to address this concern.

During the strategic reading periods, (3 times a week) teachers will continue to implement interventions such as: Wilson Just Words and STARI to address the needs of our lower - leveled students. Students that were functioning and performing at or above grade level will be involved in small group instruction and book club during these strategic reading periods. These implementations and strategies were in alignment with our school's instructional focus: "Improving critical thinking and writing across the content areas".

Question

“Can a diverse Title I middle school increase student achievement for all levels of learners through strategic programming while providing access to all school wide programs?”

Inquiry

By providing all students with the opportunity to interact with their peers, those students will have exposure to various ways of handling social, emotional and academic deficiencies that they are experiencing.

Goal

To foster a supportive learning environment where all learners can succeed despite the social, emotional, economic and academic deficiencies that students may be faced with.

Adjustment

To further address this concern, I have decided to make some adjustments to the day program so that the aforementioned subgroups would have full access to our after-school programs without any conflicts.

6th Grade

In lieu of electives such as shop and/or computers students would have math, reading and writing intervention for those 5 periods.

7th Grade

In lieu of electives such as shop and/or talent students would have math, reading and writing intervention for those 5 periods.

8th Grade

In lieu of electives such as shop and/or tech students would have math, reading and writing intervention for those 5 periods.

Through reviews of monthly progress reports, teacher assessments and report card grades we will be able to track and monitor the progress of the students that have this program.

METHODS

I.S. 318 is a community school that is dedicated to all levels of learners. For the past ten years we have had many students from outside the district apply to the school because of the various arts, academic and enrichment programs that we offer. Most recently, we became a school with a boro-wide chess program, in which elementary school students, from various districts, could apply.

After deep discussions with my staff, faculty, parents and students regarding the implementation of the program change, I realized that I had to strategically engage all the stakeholders in the understanding, the research and methodology behind this plan of action.

My ally and I formed a Culturally Responsive Environment (CRE) team consisting of a core group of teacher leaders with diverse backgrounds, who teach all subjects and disciplines. In October 2018, we began reading the Zoretta Hammond book, Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain. This core group of teachers is continuing to engage in discussions on our self-assigned readings in the book and activities to self-evaluate our understandings. We have engaged in discussions on implicit biases and how they can negatively impact students socially, emotionally and academically. We are looking at, and discussing, how these biases can affect our teaching practices and the six elements of the capacity framework for great schools.

My two Assistant Principals have engaged teachers from the core subject areas, as well as arts and physical education departments, in a book study with the book Learn Better. The book explores the latest findings on brain science and learning. The teachers in this study have discovered, and have begun to unfold, many of the implications for classroom instruction. Teachers are working in groups to incorporate these research findings into their classrooms.

In early October my ally, a lead teacher and I visited one of our top feeder elementary schools to see how they are rolling out CRE. Our thinking was to foster the activities and learning that the students were engaged in so that their transition to the middle school experience would be seamless. These transitioning middle schoolers would then serve as student ambassadors, leaders and mentors with this initiative: this, in turn, supports and reinforces our student peer mentor program.

The work that we have done so far has allowed me to look at how we support social-emotional learning and a culturally responsive environment for the students we serve. Our goals include Self Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision Making.

Over the years, we've built a high level of "pedagogical trust" within our school community. Teachers feel confident and comfortable in discussing best practices and problems of practice that they observed during inter - classroom visitations.

To maximize our best teaching practices, we have decided to conduct more walk - throughs and group observations to calibrate with the observers and teachers that are being observed. This is a system that will assist our school community in maximizing best teaching and learning practices for our students. These observations will not be limited to any specific grade or subject. Our goal is for our teachers to understand what is happening in all grades and all subjects. This will assist teachers in creating quality lesson plans that can be scaffolded to meet the needs of the students in all classrooms.

After reviewing and dissecting the 2017 and 2018 June Instructional Reports, we concluded that our students with disabilities (SWD's) and ESL students performed well below City averages. To address these concerns, we have restructured our After-School Reading and Math Recovery Program and our Saturday Academic and Enrichment Recovery Program. This restructuring includes having the student's master their current performance levels, then move to have them reach mastery on the levels thereafter. These programs are designed as 5-week modules so that teachers can assess and give actionable feedback to students and parents. The goal is to move students so that they are prepared for the next grade.

During the strategic reading periods, teachers will continue to implement interventions such as: Wilson Just Words and STARI to address the needs of our lower - leveled students. Students that are functioning and performing at or above grade level will be involved in small group instruction and book club during the strategic reading periods. These implementations and strategies are in alignment with the instructional focus of our school:

"Students will improve critical thinking skills as evidenced by discourse and writing across content areas"

and our theory of action:

"If teachers plan and implement cognitively challenging reading and writing tasks with opportunities for questioning and student discourse, then students will be able to think critically, thereby achieving improved performance in class work, discussions, essays, reports, formal and informal assessments across all subject areas."

During the Math intervention periods students will be engaged in various on-line programs that are designed to reinforce problem solving strategies, fluency and accuracy in math. These programs include, but are not limited to, IXL, Khan Academy and Sumdog and Prodigy.

To date, many of the students that are programmed for these interventions, have shown measurable gains in their performance on assessments, have been more engaged in classroom discussions and are participating more in after school programs.

One of the biggest challenges that we faced was programming. This challenge was twofold:

1. Programming the students in a way that their mandated related services and/or mandated academic programs would not be compromised.
2. Flexibly programming the teachers so that we could get the most out of their licensed teaching areas. (e.g.: special education teachers being used to service all students with IEP's and ENL certified teachers servicing ELL's and former ELL's.)

As a leader I am learning how to strategically program my school to service all my students without the risk of being out of compliance. I am also learning the "art" of flexibly programming my teachers so that their areas of expertise and licensing are fully maximized. Weekly meetings with the teachers and related service providers have given us the opportunity to give actionable and measurable feedback to one another.

Another challenge was getting the "buy in" from the students. This program change meant that they would not have the option of having elective courses in their daily program. These courses include, but are not limited to: art, photography, dance, cooking, and robotics. Many students expressed concerns about not being able to participate in some of these elective courses that they enjoy being a part of. To remedy this concern, we made sure that these students had the opportunity to enroll in these elective courses that are also offered during the after-school program. We backpacked letters home and sent email messages via Jupiter grades, our online grading system, notifying the parents of the daily program change and the Saturday academic intervention program.

To our surprise we had an overwhelming amount of support from our parents regarding this program change, based on parent feedback during our "First Friday Parent Chats". The Parent Chats are an informal platform that provides the parents with the opportunity to discuss any issues or concerns, that they have regarding school policies, procedures or programs. These parent chats are consistently well attended by families representing of all levels of learners. Through conversations parents have expressed their appreciation for their children having access to the afterschool programs while not compromising the academic intervention supports that their children need. Prior to the program change, parents have expressed their concerns about their children having limited access to the afterschool programs.

Another challenge was getting the teachers to become accustomed to planning and preparing for smaller groups of students who needed more strategic interventions based on their performance and/or achievement levels. To support this challenge, we compensated the teachers so that they could have planning time after school and on Saturday mornings. This gave the teachers the opportunity to create lessons that would address the specific academic needs of the students and assessments that would accurately measure growth and mastery in those areas.

Some of our teachers have researched, and are currently researching, various intervention tools to help provide additional interventions to support the academic deficiencies of the students they serve. These teachers are sharing their findings with the staff through email and during their teacher team and grade team meetings. Most recently, one of our 6th grade ELA teachers found a test prep website, Freckle that allows students to complete tasks consistent with specific skills the students have and/or are working towards mastery. Based on the students' levels, assignments are automatically differentiated.

Teachers are now opening up their classrooms to their peers who may have a few students that would benefit from more scaffolded lessons. The mindset of some of the teachers who may not have students who are in need of academic interventions has shifted. Teachers are going in to some of the classrooms to observe how the teachers are implementing these interventions. Delivering instruction to the students at their current achievement and/or performance level has become a schoolwide goal. We are also in the process of scheduling visits to the neighboring elementary schools to get more guidance on the materials they use for classroom instruction. We believe this will be beneficial in providing the necessary interventions for the elementary school students who articulate to us three or more grades below level.

Our DRP (Diagnostic Reading Program) scores have increased by as many as 5 points from the Fall 2018 administration to the Winter 2019 administration. It is our goal, for all the students, to make progress and show improvements in classroom participation and performance. We attribute some of the academic growth to the instruction that was incorporated during our Summer Title I/III program, as well as current the instructional practices that are in place. The summer program was designed to reinforce academic rigor and preparedness for our incoming and transitioning ESL and special education students who were not performing on grade level. The curriculum consisted of topics in the core subjects that were taught during the year, as well as, topics previously learned.

RESULTS

To date, the program change has benefited our students and our teachers. Our students are receiving the academic interventions that are needed to ensure they make adequate progress towards meeting their grade level requirements. These interventions include assessing the students to get an accurate measure of their present-day performance levels so that the teachers can strategically plan to meet the academic needs of the students. Students are exposed to various online diagnostic tools that are designed to scaffold lessons and strengthen the areas of weakness. These diagnostic tools include Reading Plus, Achieve 3000 and IXL. The students are also benefitting from having the opportunity to be part of various sports teams and other after school programs. Prior to this year, students who were mandated to attend the afterschool academic intervention programs were limited to what teams or programs they could participate in due to conflicts of scheduling. For instance, if a particular team held practices on the same days of the academic program, those students would not be able to participate. Many of the student are now part of our student clubs which affords them the opportunity to interact with their schoolmates.

As a result of these schedule changes, teachers are able to share with one another a multitude of strategies to assist students who struggle in particular areas. Inter-visitations have become more frequent and teacher team meetings have become more involved.

Strong school spirit is evident by an attendance rate of 96.5% and the 17% drop off in school suspensions. We equate this to students having more access to school programs. Staff and students are taking a more active role in issues around the school. Members of the student council deliver a daily message for the students during AM announcements through the PA system. Teachers are talking to the students about the importance of finding their voices, and classroom discussions around positive choices are evident. As a schoolwide practice, every Friday morning, during am homeroom, students and teachers are engaged in “Leader in Me” activities. These activities include, but are not limited to, promoting positive decision making and communicating with peers and teachers.

My plan is to continue to support the teachers and the students through strategic and well devised programming. I will continue to ask for feedback from the students, parents and the teachers.

“Creating a well-balanced student to promote learning and engagement”

Reflections

Being part of the Cahn cohort has broadened my perspective on this goal. The experience at Gettysburg allowed me the opportunity to look at various leadership styles and qualities. It broadened my perspective on what makes a leader effective and how certain leadership styles have positive outcomes in different situations.

During the summer leadership institute we engaged in, what I considered to be, the best professional development that could be offered to any building leaders. The neuroscience of leadership styles, ethical dilemmas, leading with spirit, et al. I have taken what I have learned, and continue to learn, from these professional learning opportunities and have included them in my conversations and meetings with my ally. We have a shared vision of how we want the school to grow and how we want to accomplish this goal. She is a part of my instructional cabinet and has taken a lead role in mentoring and supporting teachers in various roles.

To date, my Cahn experience has afforded me the opportunity to work with instructional leaders that have helped shape and deepen my thinking in regards, to more inclusive collaboration and decision making from all stakeholders.

There have been several “aha” moments during this journey and I expect the teaching staff and myself, to experience more as this work continues. Thus far, the most memorable moment came when some students articulated the reason for their academic success was due to the Saturday Program, as well as, having the opportunity to participate in more afterschool programs. Teachers have also shared their visions for student achievement and growth as educators during this process.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my school staff, my assistant principals and my ally for supporting me throughout this journey. They believed in my vision for promoting student achievement through scheduling and equity. We, as a school community, will continue to provide opportunities for all levels of learners through strategic programming and scheduling.

Special acknowledgement goes out to my superintendent, Alicja Winnicki, who is also a Cahn fellow. Her unwavering support throughout my seven years as principal is greatly appreciated.

Lastly, I'd like to thank Dr. Barbara McKeon for her guidance throughout this "magical" learning experience. Dr. McKeon has "prodded" me to dig deeper in my thinking and to broaden my visions for school improvement.

The principals in my cohort have been inspirational in my work as a professional. The professional development and the assigned readings were, by far, the most beneficial learning experiences that I have under gone. For example, the Gettysburg experience was much more than I expected. This experience really made me examine my leadership style and compare it with other leaders who mirrored my same style. It made me realize that various leadership styles are needed to nurture and promote a successful learning and teaching environment.

The Cahn experience was a revelation as it afforded me the opportunity to examine education through productive leadership. It is my hope that I can continue to develop as an effective school leader through this wonderful learning experience.